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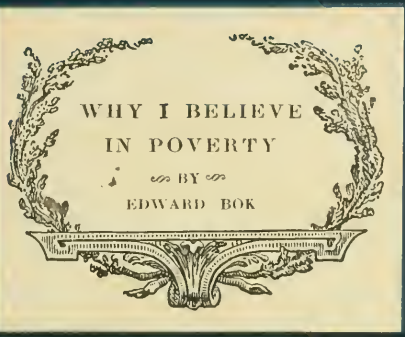

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WHY I BELIEVE IN POVERTY

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AS THE RICHEST EXPERIENCE THAT CAN COME TO A BOY

BY

EDWARD BOK

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
MDCCCCXV

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Published October 1915

A FOREWORD

THE article in this little book was published in *The Ladies' Home Journal* for April, 1915. Much to the surprise of the author, the call for copies was so insistent as to exhaust the edition of the magazine containing it. As the demand did not appear to be supplied, the article is now reprinted in this form. It is sent out with the hope of the author that it may still further fulfill its mission of giving the stimulant of encouragement wherever it is needed.

E. B.

October
Nineteen hundred and fifteen

WHY I BELIEVE IN POVERTY

WHY I BELIEVE IN POVERTY

AS THE RICHEST EXPERIENCE THAT CAN COME TO A BOY

I MAKE my living trying to edit the "Ladies' Home Journal." And because the public has been most generous in its acceptance of that periodical, a share of that success has logically come to me. Hence a number of my very good readers cherish an opinion that often I have been tempted to correct, a temptation to which I now yield. My correspondents express the conviction variously, but this extract from a letter is a fair sample: —

It is all very easy for you to preach economy to us when you do not know the necessity for it: to tell us how, as for example in my own case, we must live within my husband's income of eight hundred dollars a year, when you have never known what it is to live on less than thousands. Has it ever occurred to you, born with the proverbial silver spoon in your mouth, that theoretical writing is pretty cold and futile compared to the actual hand-to-mouth struggle that so many of us live, day by day and year in and year out — an experience that you know not of?

"An experience that you know not of"!

Now, how far do the facts square with this statement?

Whether or not I was born with the

proverbial silver spoon in my mouth I cannot say. It is true that I was born of well-to-do parents. But when I was six years old my father lost all his means, and faced life at forty-five, in a strange country, without even necessaries. There are men and their wives who know what that means: for a man to try to "come back" at forty-five, and in a strange country!

I had the handicap of not knowing one word of the English language. I went to a public school and learned what I could. And sparse morsels they were! The boys were cruel, as boys are. The teachers were impatient, as tired teachers are.

My father could not find his place in the world. My mother, who had always had servants at her beck and call, faced the problems of housekeeping that she had never learned nor been taught. And there was no money.

So, after school hours, my brother and I went home, but not to play. After-school hours meant for us to help a mother who daily grew more frail under the burdens that she could not carry. Not for days, but for years, we two boys got up in the gray cold winter dawn when the bed feels so snug and warm to growing boys, and we sifted the cold ashes of the day-before's fire for a stray lump or two of unburned

coal, and with what we had or could find we made the fire and warmed up the room. Then we set the table for the scant breakfast, went to school, and directly after school we washed the dishes, swept and scrubbed the floors. Living in a three-family tenement, each third week meant that we scrubbed the entire three flights of stairs from the third story to the first, as well as the doorsteps and the sidewalk outside. The latter work was the hardest: for we did it on Saturdays with the boys of the neighborhood looking on none too kindly, or we did it to the echo of the crack of the ball and bat on the adjoining lot!

In the evening, when other boys could sit by the lamp or study their lessons, we two boys went out with a basket and picked up wood and coal in the neighboring lots, or went after the dozen or so pieces of coal left from the ton of coal put in that afternoon by one of our neighbors, with the spot hungrily fixed in mind by one of us during the day, hoping that the man who carried in the coal might not be too careful in picking up the stray lumps!

"An experience that you know not of"! Don't I?

At ten years of age I got my first job: washing the windows of a baker's

shop at fifty cents a week. In a week or two I was allowed to sell bread and cakes behind the counter after school hours for a dollar a week — handing out freshly baked cakes and warm, delicious smelling bread, when scarcely a crumb had passed my mouth that day!

Then on Saturday mornings I served a route for a weekly paper, and sold my remaining stock on the street. It meant from sixty to seventy cents for that day's work.

I lived in Brooklyn, New York, and the chief means of transportation to Coney Island at that time was the horse car. Near where we lived the

cars would stop to water the horses, the men would jump out and get a drink of water, but the women had no means of quenching their thirst. Seeing this lack I got a pail, filled it with water and a bit of ice, and, with a glass, jumped on each car on Saturday afternoon and all day Sunday, and sold my wares at a cent a glass. And when competition came, as it did very quickly when other boys saw that a Sunday's work meant two or three dollars, I squeezed a lemon or two in my pail, my liquid became "lemonade" and my price two cents a glass, and Sundays meant five dollars to me.

Then, in turn, I became a reporter

during the evenings, an office boy daytimes, and learned stenography at midnight!

My correspondent says she supports her family of husband and child on eight hundred dollars a year, and says I have never known what that means. I supported a family of three on six dollars and twenty-five cents a week — less than one half of her yearly income. When my brother and I, combined, brought in eight hundred dollars a year we felt rich!

I have for the first time gone into these details in print so that my readers may know, at first hand, that the Editor of the "Ladies' Home Journal"

is not a theorist when he writes or prints articles that seek to preach economy or that reflect a hand-to-hand struggle on a small or an invisible income. There is not a single step, not an inch, on the road of direst poverty that I do not know or have not experienced. And, having experienced every thought, every feeling, and every hardship that come to those who travel that road, I say to-day that I rejoice with every boy who is going through the same experiences.

Nor am I discounting or forgetting one single pang of the keen hardships that such a struggle means. I would not to-day exchange my years of the

keenest hardship that a boy can know or pass through for any single experience that could have come to me. I know what it means, not to earn a dollar, but to earn two cents. I know the value of money as I could have learned it or known it in no other way. I could have been trained for my life-work in no surer way. I could not have arrived at a truer understanding of what it means to face a day without a penny in hand, not a loaf of bread in the cupboard, not a piece of kindling wood for the fire—with nothing to eat, and then be a boy with the hunger of nine and ten, with a mother frail and discouraged!

"An experience that you know not of"! Don't I?

And yet I rejoice in the experience, and I repeat: I envy every boy who is in that condition and going through it. But — and here is the pivot of my strong belief in poverty as an undisguised blessing to a boy — I believe in poverty as a condition to experience, to go through, and then to get out of: not as a condition to stay in. "That's all very well," some will say; "easy enough to say, but how can you get out of it?" No one can definitely tell another that. No one told me. No two persons can find the same way out. Each must find his way for himself.

That depends on the boy. I was determined to get out of poverty because my mother was not born in it, could not stand it, and did not belong in it. This gave me the first essential: a purpose. Then I backed up the purpose with effort and a willingness to work, and to work at anything that came my way, no matter what it was, so long as it meant "the way out." I did not pick and choose: I took what came, and did it in the best way I knew how; and when I did n't like what I was doing I still did it well while I was doing it, but I saw to it that I did n't do it any longer than I had to do it. I used every rung in the ladder as a rung to

the one above. It meant effort, of course, untiring, ceaseless, and unsparing, and it meant work, hard as nails. But out of the effort and the work came the experience; the upbuilding; the development; the capacity to understand and sympathize; the greatest heritage that can come to a boy. And nothing in the world can give that to a boy, so that it will burn into him, as will poverty.

That is why I believe so strongly in poverty, the greatest blessing in the way of the deepest and fullest experience that can come to a boy. But, as I repeat: always as a condition to work out of, not to stay in.

The Riverside Press
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